

Some Folk-Lore of Ferns

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The two extracts which follow are from Sir James George Frazer's *Garnered Sheaves* (1931), the first from pages 107-109, the second from pages 124-127. They are here reprinted with the kind permission of the publishers, Messrs. Macmillan & Co. For the rest, they speak, most attractively, for themselves.

“In a German story a prince comes to a castle where all the people are fast asleep. In a hall of the castle he finds a table, and on the table a golden ring. A silver inscription on the table declares that whoever puts the ring in his mouth will understand the language of birds. Afterwards the prince puts the ring in his mouth and thus, by understanding what three crows are saying, he is saved from death and recovers his eyesight.

“(b) A Swabian legend says that three witches of Heiligenthal culled simples in the woods and fields, and one of these simples imparted a knowledge of the language of animals. In an Italian story a man, plucking some grass at random, suddenly finds that he understands what the birds are saying. He hears one of them tell where a treasure is to be found. He then drops the grass and immediately ceases to understand the birds; he looks for the grass but never finds it again. However, he finds the treasure in the place described by the bird. In a Esthonian story a girl has learned in her youth the language of birds from an old woman, and her eldest sister imparts a knowledge of the bird language to a prince by giving him to eat a cake composed of meal, pork, and certain herbs, the magic virtue residing in the herbs. In Brittany there is a plant called the golden herb (*herbe d'or*) because it shines from afar like gold. If any one happens to tread on it, he at once

falls asleep and understands the language of birds, dogs, wolves, and so on. The plant is seldom found and never but at the peep of dawn; it can be gathered only by holy people and with certain mystic rites.

“But the plant which is most commonly supposed to impart a knowledge of the language of animals is the fern. In a German story a cowherd lost cows, and as he trudged through the grass in search of them, his great shoes (such as people wore long ago) got filled with fern seed. Suddenly he heard the calf saying that a certain ale-house would sink into the ground. The dog asked, ‘How long will it last?’ and the cock answered, ‘Till the end of the week.’ But the cowherd shook the fern seed out of his shoes and heard no more. And in a week’s time down sank the ale-house into a abyss. Similar stories are told by the South Slavonics and the Wends. In the South Slavonic version a cowherd lost two of his oxen on the Eve of St. John (Midsummer Eve), which is the only time when fern seed possesses this magic power. At last he espied his oxen lying on a bed of fern. Approaching them softly he was surprised to hear the older ox telling the younger ox that he (the elder ox) would be killed in the autumn, and that in the spring their master would be attacked by a snake, and could only be saved by the cowherd. All came to pass as the ox had foretold, but the cowherd never knew how just at that moment he had understood the ox language. The reason was that fern seed had fallen into his shoe without his noticing it; for if he had seen it, he certainly would not have understood what the oxen said. In the Wend story a man was herding horses, and the bloom of the fern, which blooms only at midnight, fell into his shoe. Next morning when he came home he told his friends what the geese had been talking about. This was noised abroad, and the squire sent for him. To

smartened himself up he took off his shoes and put on better ones, and from that moment he knew nothing of the goose language.

“Of the many other mystic properties of the fern, there is only one which it is desirable to mention in connexion with the language of animals. Fern seed or fern bloom is supposed to render the person who carries it invisible; but it is found only on Midsummer Eve, when it shines like burnished gold, but quickly fades and falls, not to be found again. The stories told of the invisibility conferred by fern seed resemble those told of its power of revealing the language of animals. A man was looking for a strayed foal on Midsummer Eve; and as he went through a meadow, fern seed fell into his shoes. In the morning he came home and sat down in the parlour. But it seemed strange that neither his wife nor anybody else paid any heed to him. Then he said, ‘I did not find the foal after all.’ Every one in the room shuddered visibly, for they heard the man’s voice but did not see him. His wife shouted his name. He stood up in the middle of the room and said, “What are you shouting for? Here I am close beside you.’ This only added to the general alarm. But now he felt something like sand in his shoes. Scarcely had he taken them off and shaken them, when he stood visible before the eyes of all.”

“In reviewing the chief means of attaining the animal language, namely, rings, fern seed, and serpents, we may notice some points of contact between them. First, as to *rings*. We have seen (p. 112, note 5) that serpents confer wishing-rings upon their benefactors just as they confer the gift of tongues. Now it is a common idea that serpents have precious stones in their heads, and in the Annamite story we have seen that the gift of the

animal language is a special property of these stones. We may conjecture, therefore, first, that rings bestowed by serpents contain these serpent-gems; and second, that rings which confer the gift of animal speech are serpent-rings, that is, contain serpent gems. This conjecture is confirmed by a second parallelism which holds between magic rings and serpent-heads (or the gems in the serpents' heads); both alike are capable of rendering their possessor invisible. This was the property of the magic ring of Gyges, and it was equally a property of the gems found in the heads of the serpents near Paraka by the Indians, who also acquired the speech of animals by eating the heart and liver of these same serpents, and it is still supposed to be a property of serpents' heads in Bohemia. It is said to be a common opinion in Wales, Scotland, and Cornwall that about Midsummer Eve the snakes meet in companies and by joining heads and hissing produce a glass ring, which whoever finds shall prosper in all his undertakings; and these rings are called snake-stones. If this idea could be proved to be wide-spread, we might perhaps suppose that this ring is the wishing-ring bestowed by serpents on their benefactors; but in the absence of such proof it is better to suppose that these wishing-rings contain the gems from the serpents' heads. However, the time when these glass rings are formed (namely, Midsummer Eve) is remarkable, because, as we have seen, this is precisely the time when the animal language is supposed to be acquired through fern seed.

“The connexion of the *fern* with serpents in folk-lore is undoubted. In Germany the fern is sometimes called the adder-plant (Otterkraut), and anyone who carried it is thought to be pursued by adders till he throws it away. The Lithuanians also call the fern the serpent-plant, because the king of the serpents is supposed to

fetch the bloom of the fern on Midsummer Eve, to be his crown. In a Lithuanian legend a queen finds by night the serpents fighting with the other animals for the fern; she plucks the fern, wounds herself in the thigh with her sword, puts the fern into the wound, the wound closes on it, and immediately the queen becomes omniscient. This probably took place on Midsummer Eve, the time when the fern possesses its magic properties. Similarly in Russia the person who catches the golden bloom of the fern on Midsummer Eve should cut his hand with his knife and insert the fern into the wound; then all secret things become visible to him. Again, the same parallelism which exists between rings and serpents exists between fern seed and serpents; for fern seed, as we have seen (p. 109), like serpents' heads, renders the wearer invisible.

"The reason why the serpent is especially supposed to impart a knowledge of the language of birds appears from a folk-lore conception of the origin of serpents. According to Democritus as reported by Pliny, serpents are generated from the mixed blood of divers birds. This explains why serpents should understand the language of birds; they do so because they are blood relations of birds, having the blood of birds in their veins. If we ask why serpents are thought to be formed of the blood of birds, we may conjecture that the idea originated in the observation that serpents eat birds and birds' eggs. Hence on the folk-lore principle that in eating of an animals' flesh one absorbs the animal's mental qualities, (1) the serpent acquires the bird language, (2) anyone who eats a serpent also acquires the language of birds. From the language of birds to the language of animals in general is not perhaps a long step in folk-lore. The idea that birds are pre-eminently talkers appears in the practice, observed by some Turkish

tribes in Asia, of giving to children who are long of learning to speak the tongues of certain birds to eat.

“It is much less easy to say why fern seed is supposed to impart a knowledge of the language of animals. In a Thuringen story a hunter procures fern seed by shooting at the sun at noon on Midsummer Day; three drops of blood fall down, which he catches on a white cloth, and these drops of blood are the fern seed. If we could suppose that the blood thus falling from the sky was the blood of birds, all would be plain. But still this would not explain the special association of fern seed with Midsummer Day. From this association, coupled with the fact that the hunter shoots at the *sun* at noon on this day of all days in the year, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that fern seed has a solar connexion. It would seem to be the blood of the sun rather than of birds. But if this is so, why should it convey a knowledge of the language of animals?”

A New Maidenhair from Peru¹

WILLIAM R. MAXON AND C. V. MORTON

The new species of *Adiantum* described herewith is an inhabitant of the humid tropical forests of the montaña of eastern Peru. It is far more graceful than its near ally *A. peruvianum*, with which it has been confused.

***Adiantum anceps* Maxon & Morton, sp. nov.**

Euadiantum, subsect. *Distichophyllae*. Rhizoma breviter repens, paleis spinuloso-denticulatis lucidis brunneis 3–4 mm. longis lineari-attenuatis dense instructum. Folia erecta, magna, stipitibus validis nigris lucidis laminas aequantibus; laminae majores 2–3-pinnatae, deltoideae, usque ad 60 cm. longae et 70 cm. latae, pinnis

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